

Interview with Maxwell D. Taylor

Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Service, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR MAXWELL D. TAYLOR

Interviewed by: Dorothy Pierce

Initial interview date: January 9, 1969

Q: This interview is with General Maxwell D. Taylor. Today is Thursday, January 9, 1969, and it's 2:15 in the afternoon. We're in General Taylor's offices in the Executive Office Building. This is Dorothy Pierce.

General Taylor, you are a very well known individual and I really don't feel that it's necessary for me to give your whole career by way of introduction. Since we are going to be dealing primarily with the '60's, I would like to make touchstones of your various services and assignments during that period. This is more for my benefit and to be sure that I have the times correct on them. You retired as Chief of Staff in 1959. This is, of course, under President Eisenhower. President Kennedy recalled you to active duty in 1961, and you served as the military representative to the President. From '62 to '64, you were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; from 1964 to 1965, Ambassador to Vietnam; and since then you have served as Special Consultant to President Johnson on diplomatic, military, and strategic matters. Just this March you have become Chairman of the military-

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: I became a member of the Intelligence Board at the same time I became a consultant. I then succeeded Mr. Clark Clifford as Chairman of that board when he became Secretary of Defense.

*Q: Also, during your career you've authored two books, *The Uncertain Trumpet and Responsibility and Response*. General Taylor, before we begin I would like to find out if you have participated in any other oral history project.*

TAYLOR: Yes, I participated in the recordings for the benefit of the Kennedy Library covering essentially the period of time during which I was associated with President Kennedy. As you have indicated, that was from April 1961 until the President's death.

Q: Have you any changes or corrections or additions to add to that tape here?

TAYLOR: No, I don't think so. I went rather thoroughly over the events which were included in that period with which I was associated. They're available on file under the terms of access to them in the Kennedy Library. I would imagine that if I changed them now, it would be for the worse.

Q: In an effort not to take your time and duplicate any statements that you have made, I will primarily pick up from '63, except for earlier associations with President Johnson and some overall pictures of the '60's which I'd like to get from you. Before we get into this, I'd like to just start with when you first met Lyndon Johnson and what the circumstances were.

TAYLOR: I'm sorry to say I can't pinpoint the exact time. It was during the period when I was Chief of Staff of the Army, which was in the Eisenhower period from 1955 to 1959. He, of course, was Senator Johnson and I saw him frequently in connection with the Preparedness Subcommittee of which he was chairman. I testified before him on many occasions. I got to know him in that sense of the word, which was not particularly intimately, but I did see enough of his work in the field of national security to form a very

Library of Congress

high opinion of his interest in national security and also the vast amount of energy he expended in becoming thoroughly knowledgeable with many complex subjects.

Q: Is there any particular time, or times, that stand out in your mind during the period?

TAYLOR: Yes, I remember very well an occasion—the year of which I cannot mention without consulting my diary—but it was known that the Joint Chiefs were very unhappy about the budget of that particular year. He [Johnson] called a full scale open hearing of his subcommittee and before klieg lights brought each one of the Chiefs, one by one, in front of the committee to testify on what they thought of their budget. It was somewhat humorous because the Chiefs, constrained as they are by the ethics of their position—in other words not taking advantage of an open hearing to complain about their civilian masters in the Pentagon—were in a very unenviable position. They had to tell the truth, yet they also certainly did not want to suggest disloyalty to the civilian leaders. It ended up something like this: that each chief would talk about his own budget and in response to questions indicate that he didn't think that budget was large enough. But then, at the end, the final question the chairman would ask, "Well, what about the entire Defense budget?"

" Well," they'd say, 'We think that is all right.'" This led one of the Senators to say, "This is the most unusual situation, where four insufficient budgets add up to a sufficient overall budget."

Q: Were there any other such occasions? [What] did you think, the then-Senator Johnson's reasoning for bringing you in this setting?

TAYLOR: Well, it was public knowledge that there was great unhappiness at the Pentagon. I presume I was the prime villain because these were the days when, as the Army spokesman, I was fighting the cause of flexible response versus massive retaliation. This was known about town but had never been aired in a public sense. I would say that Senator Johnson recognized it was a highly important matter; that it was not really parochial inter-service bickering as sometimes it was described. But it was a question of

Library of Congress

two contending strategies of great national importance. To air the issue in this way would be a profitable and useful exercise.

Q: And did you air it, sir?

TAYLOR: Within the constraints to which I referred. I believe this was '58. The following year I retired and produced *The Uncertain Trumpet*, which was a formal statement of this issue in a more or less compact form.

Q: Are there any other occasions during that period?

TAYLOR: That stands out just because of its conspicuous nature, but I have nothing other than my recollection of many discussions with Senator Johnson, hearings before him, and his great interest, as I say, in the Armed Services and the problems of the men in uniform.

Q: Did you have many sort of private sessions with him?

TAYLOR: No, I don't recall any. I would see him occasionally socially around town. But again, this was far from being an intimate relationship.

Q: Did you formulate any opinions at that point as to the possible political career of—?

TAYLOR: He was known as very energetic and as a comer in the Senate. I would see his hand in the Pentagon in the form of questions, interrogations, expressions of interest on a thousand-and-one subjects which were conducted under the responsibility of the civilian Secretaries of the Pentagon.

Q: What, in your judgment, do you feel has been the major foreign policy, defense-related problems of the 1960's?

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: I think the easy answer is Southeast Asia—Vietnam, Secondly, I suppose, the Middle East situation. That's certainly true today, and I think both of those problems, of course, have roots well in the past.

Q: This, of course, would cover part of the Kennedy period just prior to this, the Cuban missile crisis was of course involved in that era.

TAYLOR: I might say that my first involvement with President Kennedy was as a result of the Bay of Pigs. I was in private life in New York at the time and was called down two days after the Cuban Brigade surrendered to meet with President Kennedy. Vice President Johnson was present at the time in the Oval Room. I was facing a very shocked new Administration [over] this serious disaster—disaster from a military and political point of view—and complete uncertainty as to what really had occurred. After about twenty-four hours of discussing it with President Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, McGeorge Bundy—the principal actors of the White House—I agreed to undertake a review of the Bay of Pigs. I was to be chairman of an investigating committee, the other three being Bobby Kennedy; Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA; and Admiral Arleigh Burke, who was CNO at the time. So it was through the Bay of Pigs that I was recalled eventually to active duty in mid-summer, and then stayed on until 1964 when I went to Vietnam.

Q: General Taylor, in President Kennedy's campaign in 1960 he did, of course, concentrate very heavily on defense problems and posture. Had he had any contact with you?

TAYLOR: No, I was living in Mexico at the time and looking at this election campaign very much from a distance. I did, however, receive a letter from him while I was still in Mexico saying he had read *The Uncertain Trumpet*, and congratulating me on it—just a few lines. That was the only contact I had with him, and I had no idea that I would ever be associated with his Administration.

Library of Congress

Q: When you did come into his Administration—this sounds like a loaded question, but did you have any indication that you would be going into the Joint Chiefs position?

TAYLOR: No, not in the slightest. I came down first hoping to get back to Lincoln Center, where I was trying to build buildings for the Performing Arts in New York; and deliberately set up a very tight schedule for the investigation of the Bay of Pigs so that within a month or a month-and-a-half my report was ready to be filed. But at that time, when that work was drawing to an end, Bobby Kennedy, as a go-between for the President, started propositioning me, so to speak, about coming back to active duty. I had no desire to do so, but it's awfully hard to say "no" to a President, especially one that's in trouble, and he was in trouble at that time. After some negotiation it was agreed that I would come back with the title of Military Representative to the President assigned to [the position]. I had no idea that I would ever really go back into uniform, although I was technically on active duty. I worked in civilian clothes and was in effect military and intelligence adviser to the President.

Q: During this period did you have any dealings with the Vice President?

TAYLOR: Only occasionally. I would see him at NSC meetings, for example; special conferences on various things. But he was usually just in a listening role. He very rarely took a leading part in the discussions of that period. In October 1961 I was sent by President Kennedy to Vietnam with Walt Rostow and four or five other representatives of the government to examine the situation and make recommendations—which turn

Upon return, one of the first things President Kennedy asked me to do was to see the Vice President and go over the whole thing with him. I went down to the Capitol, I recall very well, and sat with him for an hour or more going over all my impressions; first my report which I was about to file with the President and all the circumstances and all the impressions related to it. We had a very warm discussion of it in the sense that he showed a great deal of interest and, I thought, a rather unusual understanding of the seriousness

Library of Congress

of what we were recommending: that this was indeed adding to a commitment which had for awhile seemed to progress favorably but had fallen into very bad times the previous year.

Q: This is of course taking on what we call the advisory role in-

TAYLOR: The expansion of the advisory role, I would say, because we'd had advisers in Vietnam ever since 1954.

Q: That's right. Do you recall anything about the meeting or his response or reaction to your report?

TAYLOR: Well, just about as I indicated—great interest in all I was talking about. I would say—my impression at the end—that he acquiesced rather reluctantly—didn't put it in formal words—that there were many uncertainties in this course we were going down, but it still looked like about the only choice we had.

Q: Any other particular occasions during his Vice Presidency?

TAYLOR: No, I wouldn't say so. Nothing stands out.

Q: Of course, in 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated, you were in the position of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Were there any changes in your activities and your responsibilities when President Johnson took over?

TAYLOR: Yes, very much so. One of the first things the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs would think about at such a time was "Does the new President have all the information he needs in relation to a sudden surprise attack, nuclear type attack—that sort of thing." He has a very complex role to perform, extremely serious decisions to make regarding even the threat of nuclear attack. They're all recorded in a so-called black book which is carried wherever the President goes. So one of my first concerns was to get time in his schedule, which was tremendously crowded, of course, with all the things he had to do, a

Library of Congress

new President suddenly carrying those heavy responsibilities. My task was to get to him and to take the black book and to go through it and remind him of what he had to think about in a crisis.

He at least had to know where the sources of information could be quickly found in the case of crisis. I made that explanation to him. It's not easy. It's a complex matter. I frankly didn't feel that I had been too effective in getting all the principal points across. [I] then sought another appointment, which I got some weeks later, to go over a second time—the contents of the famous black book.

In those early months, also, I recall very well explaining to him a very important decision that President Kennedy had taken with regard to the functions of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. President Kennedy had been very unhappy over the support given him by the Joint Chiefs at the time of the Bay of Pigs.

One of the things which came out of that investigation was the feeling on the part of some of the Chiefs that anything that was not a strictly a military matter, they had no responsibility for. Hence they had no responsibility to warn the President if, for example, the Bay of Pigs—which was being conducted by CIA—looked like a dangerous and uncertain operation. That wasn't their business; and hence they took a rather detached attitude toward it. This was very apparent to the President, once he had a chance to see really what had happened in the preparation of the Bay of Pigs operation and its execution. He paid a remarkable visit in March—I'd have to get the time—to the Joint Chiefs in person and talked to them about his concept of their responsibility, and later confirmed it in writing.

Now, it was important because he emphasized that he as President couldn't consider just military aspects alone or political aspects alone of a given problem. He had a single problem and it consisted of many facets of many components. His decision had to take into account all factors. He looked to the Joint Chiefs not as military specialists, but as men of experience who had been about the world and had seen many aspects of foreign policy

Library of Congress

problems. He wanted the Chiefs to advise him in those terms as broad generalists in the field of foreign policy, not narrow military specialists.

To me that was a very important statement and gave a new and broader orientation to the task of the Chiefs than had any President before. It was so important that I wanted President Johnson to know that that was on the books. He listened very attentively. He neither approved nor disapproved, but with the knowledge that it was on the books he tacitly approved it because he never changed it. I'm sure if he were asked today, he would say, 'yes, that is indeed the kind of support I want from the Joint Chiefs.'

Q: When you first met with the President and reviewed the contents of the black book, did you feel that he had a basis on the information or were there areas he indicated he had not been informed?

TAYLOR: He had never seen the black book before. It was unknown to him.

Q: How well was he up to date on the—?

TAYLOR: I would say, he was not up to date at all on these particular things because actually—. I wouldn't say they had been reserved for the President. All this information is for the President, and he, of course could have briefed the Vice President had he wanted. I got no impression he had ever done that. This was a new subject, or really a list of subjects as far as the President was concerned.

Q: Could you just briefly give me your assessment of what the most critical situations were at this period?

TAYLOR: Fortunately, these problems that I was concerned about, namely what the President does in case of an alert of nuclear attack never arose. So that this was just theoretical knowledge, but it could have been the most essential knowledge in the world under certain circumstances. I would say that he got to know all these things, but in the

Library of Congress

beginning we were throwing a lot of rather technical information at him in a hurry. I thought the first time was not enough and hence I asked for the second appointment.

Q: Did you feel particularly close to President Kennedy?

TAYLOR: Yes, I would say I did.

Q: Did you develop this type of relationship with President Johnson?

TAYLOR: Not to the same degree, although I had known him longer than I had known President Kennedy. It resulted somewhat from the different kind of work. I got to know President Kennedy best when I was in the Executive Office Building. I would often see him several times a day on many different subjects. In other words, it was as military representative that I really became close to President Kennedy. That closeness tended to diminish somewhat as I moved across the river into the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The physical distance from the President has a great effect. That's why the man who's outside his door is one of the strongest men in Washington. So I felt I had lost to some extent my very close feeling for President Kennedy just because I was farther away over there. With President Johnson—I was never on duty in the White House with him. So I would say I've got to know President Johnson better as a consultant than I ever did in official life.

Q: You had just really a fairly brief period in there in which you concluded your position as the Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Did anything occur or happen during that period—. I think it was about six or eight months in there before you took over your Ambassadorship?

TAYLOR: Well, nothing that really stands out in terms of our relations to President Johnson. We always had a tremendous amount of business going on, of course, between the White House and the Pentagon—to include the Joint Chiefs. But nothing that I would say is conspicuous in recollection.

Library of Congress

Q: I was thinking of the Gulf of Tonkin, but that happened later.

TAYLOR: That was later. I was in Saigon when that occurred.

Q: When did you first discuss with Mr. Johnson becoming Ambassador to Vietnam?

TAYLOR: Well, there was a sort of prolonged discussion of how to fill the vacancy that Cabot Lodge was creating in Saigon. Many, many suggestions for replacements were made. I was asked to suggest possible replacements; McNamara was; Dean Rusk, and so on and so forth. A great many people were looked at for the job. For one reason or another either the President didn't want them, or they were in positions like Bob McNamara—who himself volunteered for the job—as did Dean Rusk. Obviously they couldn't be sent to Saigon.

I was asked, would I be willing to go if the President wanted me. I said the last thing I wanted to do was to go to Saigon. "I've finally reached the top of the military profession. Furthermore, I have some family problems, for a very long period of time." I'm enjoying what I'm doing. I couldn't be out of the country

But regardless of that—McNamara was rather a go-between. A President never likes to ask anybody for something and get a negative answer, for obvious reasons. Bob McNamara finally said to me, "Well, I think it's narrowing down to you; now, what about it?"

I said, "Well, I'll just repeat, it's the last thing I want to do personally, but if the President really wants me to go over there, I will. But I'll have to limit it to one year because of family problems I have here in the United States." After that word went back to the President, he asked to see me, and then formally tendered the position, and I accepted. I didn't tell him it was the last thing I wanted to do, but I did say, "I'm sorry, I really can't stay out of the country for more than a year at this time."

Q: Would you say that anyone was particularly influential in your recommendation?

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: Recommending me?

Q: Yes.

TAYLOR: No. Of course, I was on very close terms with Dean Rusk and Bob McNamara, they're good friends of mine, and the President. I don't know that anyone was particularly—I was obviously in the group to be considered. The way I describe it—the press asked me about Dean Rusk and Bob McNamara—also Bobby Kennedy who had been mentioned. What did I have that they didn't have! I said, “I have the invaluable quality of dispensability.”

Q: Did you see any reasoning behind this? Of course, you were a very capable and logical candidate.

TAYLOR: There were many factors you could see. First, the place was going to pot very fast. Diem had been overthrown, and the place politically was in a turmoil. It stayed in a turmoil all the time I was there. The place never got better until I left as I often say. So the President wanted to send somebody that was known around the country. In other words, he didn't want to get a good professional named Joe Smith who had never been heard of. To strengthen the team and also to meet the obvious criticism, “Look here, why are you sending a general over to this highly complex diplomatic post?” He then got [U. Alexis] Alex Johnson to agree to go as my deputy, which was a very gallant thing for Alex to do. He was the senior, professional diplomat in the government—and to take a number two job after being ambassador to two or three different places and being a very valuable man around town! But he's a lifelong friend of mine, and it was a great source of strength to take him with me. But it permitted the President to state that he had a good team there, military experience and diplomatic experience, to deal with a situation which included both military and political factors.

Library of Congress

Q: Was there at this early time the anticipation of the forthcoming build-up that, of course, did occur in '65?

TAYLOR: No. Of course, we didn't know we were going to have that build-up. The principal issue that I had in my year in Vietnam was how to get some political stability in the situation. I had five different governments to deal with in a year. Coup followed coup, and to stabilize the turbulence was the greatest problem. With that, there was the growing demoralization of the South Vietnamese at their own impotence, their own ineffectiveness.

My conclusions, which were based upon observations going back to 1961, were that sooner or later we would have to use our air power against the homeland of the enemy north of the seventeenth parallel. I hadn't been Ambassador more than a few months before I started recommendations to resume consideration of this course of action, which had been considered and rejected in the past. It was only after three terrorist attacks on American installations—one, the Bien Hoa Air Base just before the election; one, on the Brink Hotel in the middle of Saigon on Christmas Eve; and then finally the attack on Pleiku Air Base in February which fortunately took place when McGeorge Bundy was visiting Saigon.

After each one, I recommended air reprisals against targets in North Vietnam and was turned down the first two times. But along with Mac Bundy, with his reinforcing voice, we got agreement to retaliate for the attack on Pleiku; which really initiated the start of the air campaign which gradually expanded therefrom.

Concurrently, one of the arguments I had with the President was on the subject of our dependents. He was terribly worried about the American dependents. Even at the time I went over, he gave me a long talk—"I think we ought to get them out just as fast as we can." I asked him to please let me get on the job and study this problem directly.

Library of Congress

I hadn't been there very long before I developed a very strong feeling that there were many objections to taking the dependents out. It looked like scuttling and running to some extent. It would create added doubts in the minds of the South Vietnamese as to whether or not we were going to stay with them. There was great fear, great suspicion at that time that because of their inability to govern themselves, we were just going to throw up the sponge and leave them at some point. If they saw all the American dependents go home, that would certainly increase their concern and probably increase their political instability, which was bad enough under the most favorable of circumstances. So that I held out against the President. He came back at me—I first had filed a negative recommendation, and he came back, arguing the case back and forth. Finally it got to the point that I was urging, "Let's start bombing North of the seventeenth parallel in reprisal for these terrorist attacks." And he was saying, "You get the dependents out, then we'll talk about the air campaign." So eventually I put my protesting wife and all other dependents on air planes and sent them back to the United States.

Q: I remember hearing at about that time myself, personally, that it would have been very difficult had an attack been made on the city to safely evacuate all our dependents.

TAYLOR: Yes, if the city were under attack. Well, that is quite true. It was always a possibility that almost anything could happen in the city. Why they didn't have more terrorist attacks in Saigon in that period than they did, I don't know, because the place was wide open to terrorist attacks. The President was very much worried about it. But it was the fact that we evacuated and then immediately started the bombing campaign that nullified the danger of demoralization of the South Vietnamese from the evacuation, because one offset the other.

Q: When you think about your tenure there, that one year, what is your feeling about the relationship of the President with his mission in the country?

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: Well, it was very close, extremely close. He asked me when I went over there to send every week a message to him directly, not to the State Department. It is a practice that has been going on with all the subsequent Ambassadors to Vietnam. I welcomed that. There's nothing like having the feeling you can talk to the President any time you want to. And I used it as a device to give him personal insights—in addition to the cables which of course are the formal formalized reactions of the mission. It's a great thing to be able to get your own coloration into the reporting.

Q: What is your reaction to the charge that the handling has been too much in Washington as opposed to there on the scene?

TAYLOR: I don't agree. This is a criticism made with regard to military operations. There was no interference with the military operations in South Vietnam when I was there, other than those which are obviously necessary. You couldn't let the military commander go running across international boundaries into Cambodia and Laos and various places—not that the military commander wanted to—but necessarily there have to be guidelines within which to conduct military operations. President Johnson and his government provided, I thought, very reasonable guidelines for the ground war.

Where Washington control became very exacting, and properly so, was in the attack of these targets in North Vietnam. Because here was the use of a military weapons for a political and psychological purpose. We were attacking those targets for three reasons. One, to give the feeling in South Vietnam that for the first time they were being allowed to strike the homeland of the enemy, the enemy that had been making their lives miserable for twelve to fourteen. Second, to restrict and make more difficult the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. The third reason was both psychological and political. It was to remind Ho Chi Minh and his council that were sitting up in Hanoi running a war at no expense that they were going to start to pay a price, and an increasing price as long as they continued.

Library of Congress

Now, that being the case, the President then had to take into account the dangers of the expansion of the war. When we started bombing, we didn't know how China would react; how Russia would react. I think most of us didn't fear this, but you couldn't eliminate the possibility of an extension of the war resulting from the bombing.

So great prudence at the outset, I think, was entirely justifiable. That meant control back here. The President is Commander-in-Chief, and he has the responsibility. If he wants to do it himself, that's his right. I didn't feel that President Johnson ever exceeded what normal prudence would dictate in controlling this very potent weapon, but also a weapon that entailed certain hazards.

Q: As Ambassador, what differences did you find in that capacity from your previous military career?

TAYLOR: Not very much, as a matter of fact. First, there was a very heavy military component in the task there, increasingly so as time went on. Also, it was a question of organizing a team of people representing various governmental activities to work as a unit, work as a harmonious group. That problem exists in the military profession. Also, it required an intimate knowledge of government here in Washington. I insisted on returning home every other month so that I could be here personally and talk to the President and talk to McNamara and talk to Rusk and the people around town. Something which my successor didn't do, and I would think he would regret it because there's nothing like getting right back to Washington to get the feel of the home front and also to bring a sense of reality of what's taking place overseas to the decision-makers.

Q: General Taylor, from the events that happened I'm wondering if there are particular things like Bien Hoa and Pleiku that you just recall the events as they occurred while you were there. I'm wondering how you ever got any sleep on that job.

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: It was a seven-day a week job; always has been; and still is. But it was intensely interesting just because there were so many things going on, and so many things going on very badly. I think most people would say that period was the trough of our policy. It was the black year. The fifth government I dealt with was the Ky government, from which has sprung the constitutional government today. Things got better after I departed. But it was a very strenuous year because of the uncertainty of whether you could hold the Vietnamese government together and get the Vietnamese people behind this war to a greater extent. So my problems were not military. The war itself I never worried about, but rather the political aspects of the problem.

Q: It was during this period, wasn't it, that there was a growing Buddhist uprising. So you were also dealing with that?

TAYLOR: Well, really, the Buddhist problem—very much misinterpreted at the time here in Washington—had its most serious consequences in the year of '63 when it resulted in the overthrow of the Diem government and his assassination. But that same group of radical bonzes (Thich Tri Quang, etc.) were still running around the country, were a tremendous problem because having tasted political success in overthrowing Diem, they wanted to continue to be a political force without any responsibility, but pulling the rug from under the recurrent governments. They were pretty successful a couple of times. But by the time of the end of 1965, we rather closed in on them, and also, on some of the generals who had been collaborating with these Buddhists. We got some of the trouble-makers like Khanh out of the country—who are still out of the country, I'm glad to say.

By the end of that year, the South Vietnamese themselves were so discouraged by their bad political performance that they were getting to the point where they were willing to put national interests ahead of their minority factionalism, which had been the great curse of the previous period.

Library of Congress

Q: You said that you felt that this was misunderstood in Washington. Were they placing too much emphasis on this?

TAYLOR: In '63 misreporting, twisted reporting, had created an impression that the Diem government—Diem being a Catholic and his brother and his immediate family very devout Catholics—was guilty of religious oppression of Buddhists. Well, it never was.

It was really a small wing of the Buddhists allied to some of the generals who were anti-Diem in a—really a conspiracy, which created a series of events including the burning of bonzes, which unhappily is not an uncommon thing in the history of Vietnam but to us in America it looked like a horrible thing. I can still remember the picture of the burning bonze on the front page of one of our weekly magazines. It shocked our entire country and created the impression that something must be seriously wrong in the relations between the great religions in Vietnam for this to take place.

Well, there wasn't anything seriously wrong. The religion versus religion issue did not exist. But it was rather the political groups, which included certain segments of Buddhists and certain segments of the Catholics who were vying for political advantage. It was a political game of alliances and of groupings based upon religion.

Q: Did you have any feeling that there was any Communist undermining or motivation in these Buddhist uprisings?

TAYLOR: We always suspected it but never proved it. Some of the Buddhists leaders were certainly following a course of action in parallel with what the Viet Cong, or Hanoi, would certainly have liked them to follow. But whether that was just empathy or whether it was actual conspiracy, no one ever knew. We never were able to prove a direct link between Thich Tri Quang and his people and the Viet Cong.

Library of Congress

Q: General Taylor, did you cover the assassination of Diem in the other tape with the Kennedy Oral History?

TAYLOR: Yes.

Q: Could I just ask you one for one statement on that just to be sure that it's in there?

TAYLOR: All right, and then I'm going to have to break off. It's three o'clock.

Q: There are many, many stories and charges that there was of course, U.S. involvement in that assassination. What is your view of that?

TAYLOR: There was a schism here in Washington between the senior advisers of the President on the whole question of Diem. We were not together in Washington. There were two groups. One group said, "you can't win with Diem." That was their slogan: "you can't win with Diem! He's a tyrant, a dictator. He has a bad brother and a bad sister-in-law" and that was true; "They have come between him and his people. He can't communicate with his people. His leadership is deteriorating. We must get rid of him."

The other group, which I belonged to said, "Well, most of those things you say are true, but if you get rid of him, then who?" Well, nobody had an answer to that. They hadn't the foggiest idea of how to answer that. So Group B would say that it was a great folly to do anything that would encourage an overthrow of Diem unless we had a better solution, or at least even a solution, which was not the case.

That split existed all through '63 with differing interpretations of what these events meant that we were seeing in Vietnam. But, meanwhile, President Kennedy did not take a personal position. He was still unconvinced by either side. But he also favored doing what Ambassador Lodge recommended, that various sanctions be imposed upon Diem—holding back aid, various things to remind him he'd better see the Ambassador and listen to his advice—something that Diem was not doing at the time, or was resisting at the time.

Library of Congress

Well, you can't do the things like that without it being public knowledge. Just the very fact that the United States government was showing disenchantment with Diem, disapproval of him publicly, was great encouragement to the people who had been plotting against him for years; so in that sense our actions encourage the plotters. Simply by seeing that we disapproved of Diem's actions we certainly encouraged the elements that eventually overthrew him and assassinated him. Beyond that I know nothing. I know nothing of any direct American intervention, and I don't even know who killed Diem. I don't know who knows, as a matter of fact. He and his brother were found shot in that personnel carrier.

Q: General Taylor, this is our second interview, and today is Monday, February 10. We are again in your offices. We had been talking about Vietnam in our first interview. I would like to continue with that area and ask you, first, about our bombing of North Vietnam. Of course, this begins with the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I'd like to have your assessment of it and your activities regarding the bombing of North Vietnam.

TAYLOR: Well, with regard to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, my role was really nothing. I was simply a very interested by-stander and observer from Saigon, where I was the Ambassador. Also, of course, I was impressed with the Congressional resolution which followed the Tonkin Gulf incident with the very sweeping authorization it gave to President Johnson in the use of American military forces in Southeast Asia. But I had no part in it other than observing it.

With regard to the bombing of North Vietnam—going back to my visit in 1961 at the behest of President Kennedy, the report which I submitted upon my return to Washington included a reminder that the day might well come when it would be necessary to strike the source of aggression, which was North Vietnam. We did not recommend it in 1961, hoping that we could settle the issue of aggression within the confines of South Vietnam without going to the North. However, by the time I got there as Ambassador, following a disastrous political upheaval in the wake of the assassination and overthrow of President Diem, I became convinced early that bombing of the North should be undertaken fairly soon—I thought

Library of Congress

about the fall of 1964—in order to pull the country together; give it a feeling that they did have a chance against the enemy of the North who had been at their throats then for some twelve or thirteen years. So as Ambassador I began to recommend that this be done following an evacuation of our American dependents in South Vietnam.

Then in the fall—November 2, as I recall, of 1964—the enemy mortared our big air base at Bien Hoa with considerable damage to our airplanes and some loss of life. This was the first time the enemy had deliberately attacked an American installation, and it indicated a clear change of tactics on their part. I immediately recommended a reprisal strike against appropriate targets in North Vietnam. This was just on the eve of the American presidential election. It was a most untimely recommendation as viewed from Washington. I'm sure it was received with very little enthusiasm.

Q: How did the Vietnamese leaders feel about this? Were you receiving their—?

TAYLOR: They, of course, were anxious all through this period to start striking North Vietnam, even though many of them were Northerners themselves. After the bombing started I would take around the target list to show the then-Prime Minister Quat where we were going to strike to get his concurrence. He would say, "Well, that's interesting. That's only about thirty-five miles from my uncle's farm." But he was perfectly happy about it. In fact, he was convinced that it was indispensable that we use our air power against the North.

After the Bien Hoa incident, on Christmas Eve the Viet Cong blew up the Brink Hotel in the heart of Saigon—again an attack at the Americans. Again I recommended reprisal. It was not accepted. But in the meanwhile the debate was getting very intense in Washington. It was quite clear that they were going to have to take this step, reluctant as the leadership was to do so.

It was actually in February—February 7, I believe—that the next major attack on our installations took place. That was in Pleiku, again with considerable loss of life and

Library of Congress

damage to American planes. By pure chance McGeorge Bundy was visiting me in Saigon at the time so that both of us got on the telephone to Washington and reported, "Now this is the time we feel we must strike back." Plans had already been made, and strikes were off in the course of the next twelve hours against military targets in the southern part of North Vietnam.

President Johnson announced why he did it. He had three reasons. They were valid then, and I think they're valid now. The first was the point I've already mentioned—the need to raise the morale of the South and give the people of South Vietnam the feeling that for the first time they were striking the homeland of the enemy. Second, to use our air power, insofar as air power could be effective, to limit and slow down and restrain the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. And then finally, to remind Ho Chi Minh and his advisers in Hanoi that they were no longer sitting in a sanctuary directing a war without paying a price for it. And that little by little, by the graduated use of our air power we could destroy everything of military value in North Vietnam which was above the ground. That was the story of the initiation of the bombing and I think the general reasoning behind it.

Q: There has been a lot of controversy around the bombing as it has continued over the years. What is your assessment of the effectiveness of it?

TAYLOR: I think the greatest testimonial has been the screams of anguish from North Vietnam, and the fact that they mounted a worldwide campaign for over two years to get the Americans to give up the bombing. To them it was a catastrophe. From that point of view I would say that it met generally the three points which I indicated as being the justification.

I think most of the skepticism has been directed at the fact that obviously it did not stop the infiltration. The answer to that is that the infiltration would have been much greater, much easier, much cheaper, and much faster had it not been for the bombing. So I have

Library of Congress

no question in my mind that it was justified, was necessary, and I regretted very deeply that we gave it up so cheaply.

Q: This is for the negotiations as of recent date?

TAYLOR: This is under the present conditions.

Q: We had several bombing pauses in there-

TAYLOR: Yes, I know that, and I was against those for the reason that it turned out that they failed. They failed, but at the same time they gave the enemy the hope that, if the Americans can be talked into a pause, they can be talked into a suspension. And if they can be talked into a suspension, they can be talked into a cancellation."

Your next question bears on very much of a related matter—the introduction of American ground forces which took place just a month later. We started the bombing in February of '65 and the first troops—the first Marine element—landed in Da Nang in March. That was a very tough decision also, and I must say that I had doubts. I had no reservations about recommending the bombing. I did have reservations about the introduction of ground forces because it was quite apparent that once we started, no one could predict what would be required—how far we would go. But it was the judgment of our military leaders in South Vietnam that by the spring of 1965 the military situation had changed so adversely, that General Westmoreland could no longer guarantee the safety of the great base at Da Nang against attack.

It was in December 1964 that for the first time, so far as we know, North Vietnam began to send to the South the tactical units—regiments and divisions—of its own Army. Our commanders in the north sensed the fact that they were being hit by forces well beyond the strength of those which had been present previously. General Westmoreland became very much concerned about Da Nang. It was for the purpose of defending that base that the first Marines came ashore.

Library of Congress

In the course of the next couple of months the whole situation was seen more clearly as more critical than we had anticipated, and General Westmoreland also asked for troops to go into the Saigon area to protect Bien Hoa and the many installations in the Saigon vicinity. There were three purposes—three missions—given those troops. The first was to be responsible for the close defense of important American installations. The second was to control the immediate environment of these bases so that they could not be mortared—or at least mortaring would be made more difficult; and finally, to provide some mobile reserve of combat troops that could be moved by our helicopters quickly to enter the ground battle to assist the South Vietnamese when they had engaged an important target.

The necessity for it was the fact that if we hadn't done something, we would certainly have probably lost the northern three provinces. After that loss we'd either have had the harder task of rooting out the enemy after they got in, or conceding the North to the enemy. And that consideration accounts, I would say, for the troop build-up through '66 and '67. It was really to match the increasing escalation of the other side.

Q: Did you at the first introduction anticipate the number it would go to?

TAYLOR: I beg your pardon?

Q: When we first committed our ground troops there, did you anticipate the size of the commitment it would go to?

TAYLOR: No, I did not. I don't think anybody could. Nobody did. Always, as is appropriate, the military staffs in Saigon and in Washington had contingency plans—in other words, the plans to put in ten thousand, twenty thousand, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand, and so on—simply a catalog of plans so that they could be implemented rapidly if the decision were taken. But no one undertook in those days to try to estimate what the requirement would be because it depended so much on how far the enemy was willing to go.

Library of Congress

As to the appraisal of the military leadership and strategy in Vietnam I'm not sure whether you refer to the American, or the Vietnamese, or a combination.

Q: Primarily the Americans, but I'd like to know the Vietnamese, too.

TAYLOR: I would say that the American forces performed well beyond what anyone had a right to expect when they were thrown into action in a distant country against a very elusive enemy. But fortunately, beginning in 1962 under President Kennedy, our Armed Forces had been directed to prepare themselves for this kind of combat. Hence they entered Vietnam with an excellent training ground preparation for this kind of war.

I think their performance over there is testimony by itself. I don't have to praise them. They've achieved far more with fewer forces than anyone ever anticipated in a guerrilla war where the enemy has open frontiers and the possibility of retreating into sanctuaries to which we cannot follow him. Our American leadership, I think, has been superb. I don't know of any improvement that anyone could make to the general tactics and the strategy, under the ground rules which have been decided for the Armed Forces.

Q: What about the Vietnamese leadership and the—?

TAYLOR: The Vietnamese leadership was very spotty, more or less as was the case in Korea where, as in Vietnam, we had the problem creating an indigenous army on the battlefield. Leadership is hard to come by in these Oriental countries, particularly a country like Vietnam where leadership was deliberately retarded or suppressed by the occupying foreigners—the Japanese and the French and the Chinese before that. So it has been difficult to find promising young leadership, to cultivate it and develop it in order to meet the very arduous requirements of combat.

Library of Congress

However, I think the record, when it's all over, will be good, considering the great handicaps of training forces in time of war. So they've been getting better all the time, but they're still far from being a modern or a sophisticated armed force.

As to the cost of Vietnam or the value of Vietnam, I suppose you would say—I have not doubt in my mind that the historians twenty-five years from now, provided we end this in consistence with our objectives, will say it was a painful but necessary course of action on the part of our government. As to how to regard Vietnam—whether it's a civil war or a limited war—neither describes it. It's a war of liberation, a people's war of the kind which has been announced by Peking, by Hanoi, and by Moscow as the favored technique for the expansion of Communism because it is relatively cheap; it can be disavowed; and it's not risky. It does not risk escalating into large conventional war, or a nuclear war. The spokesmen of all three capitals, Khrushchev, Kosygin, Lin Piao, Giap, Mao, all of them have proclaimed openly: “This is the way we're going to do it.” So this is the real test of whether or not this technique, the “war of liberation”, will succeed and become available for use elsewhere, or whether it's a disastrous failure—which I hope it will be.

Q: Do you think Vietnam could be considered a mistake in terms of where it was, the political situation—?

TAYLOR: It's awfully hard to move Vietnam, you know.

Q: Well, for instance, perhaps it might have been in Thailand, or Indonesia, or-

TAYLOR: You go where the trouble is. In other words, we didn't pick this place. This is where the crisis occurred. It either had to be met there, or not met at all. If it hadn't been met there at all, then Thailand would have gone. Laos would have long since followed, and I suspect the Communists would still be in charge in Djakarta.

The negotiations, of course, represent a new development since last year. I personally think we made a mistake in showing overeagerness for negotiations, feeling that there's

Library of Congress

something miraculous in sitting down at a negotiating table. Having observed the long two-year session at Panmunjom, I was far from convinced that it was timely to start negotiations with Hanoi until the conditions were sufficiently unfavorable to the enemy that he would come to the table more or less compelled to negotiate in good faith and with some celerity—without foot-dragging.

I think we have the assets now in the negotiations to come out successfully in the sense that we will eventually get a solution which allows the South Vietnamese to choose their own government, and some kind of, at least, a cessation of hostilities.

The real question, I think, will be whether the of a settlement will be such as t encourage the hoped-for continued stability and peace in the region. It depends upon our own determination here in the United States not to get tired, not to get impatient, and to throw in the hat just because this business gets dull and boring and unpleasant.

Having made a hundred-and-forty-nine speeches on the subject of Vietnam, I'm quite prepared to go on for another hour or so in this discussion, but I think that probably hits the high points of the Vietnam situation.

Q: Let me just ask you a few more things regarding this. I think one thing that has occurred so much is the speculation of how much the President was running the war—what the communications were back and forth. Could you give me an idea of how much, while you were Ambassador, you were communicating with the President?

TAYLOR: Well, one communicates all the time with the President in a certain sense, because a mission such as ours in Saigon sent off hundreds of cables to Washington each day. In a certain sense of the word, they were messages to the President—not that he read them all, nor should he read them all.

I was charged, when I went there, to write the President each week my own summary of the situation, which I did, and which I always welcomed because I had a chance to be sure

Library of Congress

I was dealing directly with the President and not with the many officials that lie between the cable head in Washington and the addressee.

In terms of his control of military operations, there has been criticism, I think largely unjustified, that Washington exercised too much control over military operations. I would not agree with that because insofar as the ground war was concerned—the operations within the confines of South Vietnam—I know of no case where there was anything which I would call undue civilian interference in the conduct of the military affairs.

But the bombing of North Vietnam was a different thing. It was moderately risky because we didn't know at the outset just how the Communist world would respond. Conceivably this could have broadened the war in a way that certainly would have been undesirable from our point of view. It didn't turn out that way, but responsible leaders in Washington naturally wanted to proceed cautiously to sense the enemy reaction. And they did.

Actually the bombing of North Vietnam was the use of a military tool for political purposes. We were trying to influence the mind of the conduct and behavior of the political leaders in North Vietnam. That was the primary purpose. Hence it was only reasonable that the President would want to know just exactly how we were doing, what kinds of targets, and so on. So there was detailed control of the air war in North Vietnam, but no place else as far as I have ever observed. And I felt, because of the sensitivity of that air campaign, that a large degree of control was justified. I think perhaps there was too much control, but that's clearly a question of judgment. The fact that control came from here was entirely justified.

Q: We've had growing dissent and criticism of the war, and think it was topped off with the TET offensive of last year.

TAYLOR: Because of a complete misunderstanding of the TET offensive. The TET offensive was the greatest victory we ever scored in Vietnam. We said so at the time, but

Library of Congress

there are too many people here who wanted to find defeat. They wanted to drag defeat from the jaws of victory.

Q: What do you think has been the effect of all the criticism and dissent in the United States?

TAYLOR: I think it's very unfortunate. It made it awfully easy for the enemy and encourages him to hang on. It's exaggerated in the press. The impression is greater than the actual fact. This all works against the interests of the United States. There's no question about it.

Q: I have read that President Kennedy did not believe in the domino theory of overthrow in that area of the world. What do you think Mr. Kennedy would have done in this situation? That's sort of speculative, but do you think we would have gone this far? Would we have committed troops? Would it have developed the same way?

TAYLOR: I think you should go back and read what he said in the time he was President. He made some very, very strong statements over and over again. I often quote as one of the most eloquent of his statements—one made in 1961 to Congress—where he points out that “the hopes of the people of the emerging nations are going to be resolved in Asia, and, for that reason, in the struggle for freedom in Asia (and he was talking about Southeast Asia). We Americans cannot afford to stand aside.” Over and over again he made very strong statements on this subject. Just go read the record.

What he would have done—I would never attempt to say I have been very impatient with some of his former friends who now pontificate on what Mr. Kennedy would or would not have done. I think it's unjust to his memory to undertake such speculating.

Q: Just one more question on this area. What has been your assessment of our pacification efforts there?

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: It's not our pacification effort. South Vietnamese which we assist. It's the pacification effort of the South Vietnamese which we assist. It has been very hard, very difficult, because pacification, which really means rebuilding the nation in the rural areas, depends upon the degree of security. We found that in our frontier days we couldn't plant the corn outside the stockade if the Indians were still around. Well, that's what we've been trying to do in Vietnam. We planted a lot of corn with the Indians still around, and we've sometimes lost the corn. So there've been ups and downs in the whole pacification program resulting largely from the ebb and flow of security. As security becomes greater, as it is now, pacification will move along much better. But it necessarily lags behind; in point of time, the military operations which are necessary to attain security.

Q: Do you think we still could have a military victory in Vietnam?

TAYLOR: I beg your pardon?

Q: Do you still think that we could achieve a military success in Vietnam?

TAYLOR: What does that mean?

Q: Stabilize politically and militarily the country with a military force.

TAYLOR: Not with military force in itself, but you can't do it without military force. This is a combined effort in which we utilize our military resources, our political, our economic, our psychological resources. All have to be used. No one will do it by itself. No one ever suggested the possibility of a pure military victory. This is a straw man that the opponents of the Vietnam policy erect over and over again for the pleasure of knocking down.

Q: I think I was thinking in the terms of there not being negotiations.

TAYLOR: Yes, it's entirely possible, but that doesn't mean a military victory. You can have a tacit peace in which the other side simply fades away and never admits he has been

Library of Congress

there. They still deny in North Vietnam that they have any North Vietnamese forces in the South, although we happen to know that they've had seven to eight divisions. We have prisoner-of-war stockades filled with their troops, but they still deny it.

Q: What do you think has resulted in the U.S. standing in world opinion with our commitment in Vietnam?

TAYLOR: In the immediate vicinity in the countries which have the greatest stake, our standing has gone up enormously. In those countries that have no stake, it has become a political football in which we've been unjustly criticized. Although I must say that many times the criticism of the foreigners has simply echoed the criticism of our own press here at home.

Q: The phrase "credibility gap" has so much centered around our Vietnam war, and the public's lack of understanding of it. To what would you attribute this?

TAYLOR: I'm never quite sure what it means, but I assume it means the uncertainty as to the accuracy of reports we're getting on the Vietnam war. I quite agree that some reports are highly inaccurate, but most of them do not come from official sources. I don't say that necessarily critically of the press and the publicity media, for the fact is the country is divided into forty-four provinces. In every province the situation is somewhat different. So a thoroughly accurate report in Province A may paint one picture which is correct, and a different report in Province B may also paint a correct picture. Both are reported to us, and we don't know which to believe. We assume somebody is misleading us, yet both happen to be telling the truth. It has been a very difficult war, from that point of view, to report accurately, without bias, and avoiding dangerous generalizations. It is easy to acquire one or two facts and then assume they apply everywhere, where actually they do not.

Q: Do you think the fact that we've had such massive coverage of this has perhaps increased the dissent and criticisms?

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: Oh, very much so. Because the very magnitude and the volume of the reporting add to our confusion. We turn on our TV. We get a sequence of pictures all different and apparently talking about different things. I think most of our good citizens are not necessarily pro or anti-Vietnam policy. They're just confused, and just give up trying to understand something that seems incomprehensible.

Q: That about covers—I know very superficially—what I had in mind on Vietnam unless you have any further-

TAYLOR: No, as I say, I can hold forth for some time, but I think you've brought out the principal points very well.

Q: Did you have any activities regarding the Dominican intervention?

TAYLOR: Not in the slightest. I was not involved. I was away most of the time.

Middle East—again, I had no role to play. While focusing my attention largely on the Far East as a consultant to the President, I was very much interested in the Middle East, but I played no part in it.

The Pueblo incident you might want to talk about. There again, I was very much an interested observer, particularly in my role as a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. I was, of course, thoroughly aware of the kind of ship the Pueblo was, the kind of mission it performed—a very important mission that needs to be done. And that was about it.

When I read about the hijacking, I was, of course, surprised that North Korea had engaged in piracy of this sort, and had a strong suspicion—which I don't think has ever been verified—that it was related to the TET offensive which occurred about the same time. In other words, that they were making signals to us that if we weren't careful that there would be a

Library of Congress

new front opened in Korea. As I say, this connection has never been established, but that was certainly a suspicion I had at the time.

With regard to the Intelligence loss of the equipment, I thought it was very serious. As to the conduct of the crew, I would not make any comment. There's a court-martial going on at this time to determine the facts.

Q: I'd like to go into some more general areas. As you said, you've primarily been working in the Far East, but I did want to ask you about over the years about our relations with Russia and Colonist China—perhaps emphasize Communist China.

TAYLOR: Well, those subjects are so broad really I can't do justice to them in this short period of time. Communist China, of course, is the dominant power in the Far East in terms of manpower and potential. The cultural revolution, which seems to be dying down, has certainly set back the progress in Communist China to a great degree. One of the China watchers in Hong Kong, whom I talked to only last week, feels that they're about where they were now at the start of the Great Leap Forward. In other words, they're now lagging six or seven years behind what might have been called a normal schedule of development had the cultural revolution not taken place.

Q: You mean the first Great Leap Forward they had?

TAYLOR: Yes.

Q: That was in '57?

TAYLOR: Approximately. I'd have to check my figures.

Q: And they would be five or six years behind that now?

TAYLOR: Well, they're about back to that point in terms of gross national product per capita, levels of food stocks, and things of that sort.

Library of Congress

Q: I know this is your area. What brought about this cultural revolution, as they called it—this upheaval in China?

TAYLOR: It was, so the experts say, primarily Mao's feeling that the revolution, of which he was the father—that its purposes were being nullified by the new generation which was moving somewhat in the direction of the Soviet relaxation and readjustment of attitude. He felt that the goals of the revolution were being sacrificed and would be lost unless he intervened and threw the rascals out, which he proceeded to do—the rascals meaning many of the senior Communist leaders who had been his associates throughout many of the years before.

He did this by an alliance between his own power group in Peking, the Armed Forces which have been rather surprisingly loyal to Mao—in other words, there have been no internal splits within the Armed Forces; and then the militant youth have been utilized—the Red Guard. The result has been a turmoil, a turbulence, a chaotic condition which certainly must be a matter for deep regret on the part of Mao, who is an old man and undoubtedly wants to leave his country better off than when he found it.

I think that we outsiders, we simply have to watch these developments, hoping that we can domesticate Red China to some extent—bring it back into the family of nations; but certainly that objective is relatively far off now.

Q: Sir, in your career, have you ever had occasion to speak with Communist Chinese leaders?

TAYLOR: Never. Now, NATO is a subject in itself, and I think you'd better drop that.

I'll just comment on SEATO. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization was established, you'll recall, in 1954 at the time of the Geneva Accords. It reflected our lack of confidence in the Geneva Accords and in the ability to tranquilize Southeast Asia on the basis of those Accords. It has been a target of criticism during our involvement in South Vietnam because

Library of Congress

as a treaty organization it has not taken part. This results from the fact that its membership does not coincide with the realities of national interests in that part of the world. You'll recall that the United Kingdom, France, and Pakistan are members of SEATO. No one of the three has any intention of making any commitment of any value to the support of the present objectives of SEATO in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, the fact that we've had the treaty has allowed us to work freely with as important a country as Thailand in connection with our operations in South Vietnam. So it has been of indirect value, although certainly as a coalition it has done nothing directly to assist our purposes in Southeast Asia.

Q: Do you think that it's going to have a future of strength?

TAYLOR: I would hope that in the review of foreign policy which I am sure Mr. Nixon's Administration intends to make that we would look SEATO over and decide whether we need that particular coalition. I doubt it in its present form. Or whether it would be possible and desirable to put together a new coalition of those countries that really have a commonality of interest and are willing to put something on the line; in other words—a changed membership.

Now I'm afraid I'm going to run out of time if you're not careful here. Again, national security is such a broad subject I wouldn't be able to deal with it here.

Q: Let me just ask you then—what do you think our position should be on deployment of ABM systems?

TAYLOR: That, again, is a matter that I would have to study a great deal. I've not believed in the so-called “thin” deployment against the Chinese threat. I think if I restudied the arguments and examined the technical feasibilities that I would still feel that there is a justification for an anti-ballistic missile system and deployment, but one primarily directed

Library of Congress

at improving the deterrent capability of our strategic forces rather than that uniformly thin kind of protection which is implicit in the present plan.

Q: Part of this proper mix of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities that I was asking about, of course, reflects some of your own work on which you-

TAYLOR: Well, that's very true. The answer is that we need both. It's a question of judgment just where the right balance lies. I certainly felt that under the Eisenhower Administration the emphasis on nuclear capabilities was out of balance—over-balanced—in that direction. I felt that the Kennedy-Johnson Administrations brought it back into about as good balance as I personally could recommend.

I think we're losing the idea that we can talk in terms of superiority in nuclear forces. Some of our public men still seem to think that we can say we're superior or inferior in strategic weapons. I don't think so. I like the term sufficiency. If we get enough, we ought to stop regardless of what that number is in terms of the number we think the other side has. But the question of how much is enough is perennially the most difficult question for the Secretary of Defense to answer, and also for the President—not only for nuclear weapons, but for non-nuclear weapons, for anti-submarine warfare, for all the categories of military forces.

Q: The phrase 'massive retaliation' is being brought up again in terms of perhaps we should have more massively, if not nuclearly, committed ourselves in Vietnam.

TAYLOR: Who said that?

Q: I think I've just been reading it in the papers. What is your impression of that?

TAYLOR: I think there's a very good point for a part of the question. I mentioned that we used our air power slowly, gradually, giving Ho Chi Minh ample time to reflect on consequences. There was a certain logic in support of that gradualism. On the other hand,

Library of Congress

the military commanders would certainly say that's not the way to use air power or any other kind of power. Once you decide to use your military weapons, you should use them rapidly with maximum effect and with the benefit of surprise. I think there's a real question of whether we might not have achieved our end of shocking Ho Chi Minh into submission had we had all our bombing in one month rather than in three years. However, with regard to unclear weapons I would say I know of nobody with any responsibility ever suggesting that this was a place for nuclear weapons. All right, what would you like me to speak on next here?

Q: I'd like to ask you what you think the future trouble spots have been, perhaps incorporating in this what have been, besides Vietnam, the major defense-related problems of the '60's?

TAYLOR: I think the history book is pretty clear on that. Today, and throughout most of the decade, in addition to the Far East—Korea and South Vietnam—we've had the problem of the Middle East, which is still there unresolved. It's one of those areas where even with the wisdom of Solomon and the power of Caesar, it would be very difficult to know exactly what to do. I'm afraid that problem's going to carry over for some time to come.

Meanwhile, there are endless possible trouble spots. We never know where they're going to turn up. The Dominican Republic Affair nobody ever planned; nobody ever anticipated. All the volatile new nations may conceivably become spots for concern. I think one of our great questions that we'll be faced with in the next decade is when to intervene and when not to intervene overseas. Where is there a true American interest, where there is not.

In a certain sense of the word we have some interest in every square foot of the globe reduced in size as it is by modern communications. On the other hand, we've discovered what it is to try to stabilize one small part, namely South Vietnam—the cost in men, treasure, and effort, national and international standing. So I think we'll be much more prudent following Vietnam, but still that problem will be with us.

Library of Congress

Q: Do you think it has made us wary of this type of commitment?

TAYLOR: I think so, very much so. Having said that, I will then point out that after Korea we had the cry, "Never another Korea," and that was in '53. In 1954 President Eisenhower signed a letter to President Diem offering him aid in South Vietnam. In other words, even while the cry was still in the air, "no more Koreas," we were laying the foundation of our commitment in Vietnam.

Q: Sir, some of your earlier works and writings have talked about Defense Department organization, and of course during Mr. McNamara's tenure there was a reorganization and changes. I'd like to have an assessment of that related to your previous-

TAYLOR: I generally have been a great admirer of Secretary McNamara. I didn't necessarily agree with all the things he did, but he did so many fine things. I think that his balance sheet is very strongly on the plus side.

Mr. Clifford was not in office long enough to leave a lasting imprint on the organization. He kept it the way he found it and left the detailed operations to his very experienced deputy, Mr. Nitze.

Q: Can you offer me a comparison of these two men, having worked with them?

Well, they're quite different. Mr. McNamara is an organization man, a doer, the operator type. Of course, he had been a Ford official—a Ford president—and was used to handling large organizations. He'd had a good training in cost analysis and systems analysis and that sort of thing which he put to work—perhaps some will say overworked—in dealing with the military problems.

Mr. Clifford's a lawyer—a very able lawyer. He's an expert in public relations. He had very, very friendly relations with Congress, with the public, with the press, and worked at those things leaving the operation of the Pentagon largely to Mr. Nitze.

Library of Congress

Mr. McNamara was the other way. He was oriented inwardly toward his own shop, and was reputedly brusque and metallic in his public relations and that sort of thing. So they both had their strengths but in different categories.

Q: Do you think the position of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has changed and improved?

TAYLOR: Changed and improved. I don't like to say exactly—improved against what? I would just say the Joint Chiefs of Staff role was, and should be, a very strong one under any Secretary—in spite of the undeserved reputation of Mr. McNamara of downgrading the military, as the press would put it. I didn't agree with that at all. He was a very sympathetic listener to the Joint Chiefs. He gave them their day in court. They had a chance to argue their case. He didn't necessarily follow their advice, but he certainly gave them a chance to be heard. How the Chiefs-Secretary relations are at the present time, I'm not really close enough to the present officials to Comment.

*Q: I was thinking in terms of your book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, where you had talked about the weakness in the system of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.*

TAYLOR: I would say things have improved since then. The great weakness then was that there was no Secretary of Defense during most of the time that I was Chief of Staff of the Army who was willing to decide different issues. So the result was it left the Chiefs wrangling all the time with their disputes unresolved. Important issues were pushed under the rug, as we say, and left there for years at a time. One of Mr. McNamara's great qualities was he insisted on these things being brought up to him, and he would decide them if the Chiefs couldn't. That's all to the good for the general business of the Pentagon.

Q: Do you feel that there is good communication between the Secretary of

Defense and service organizations?

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: I don't observe that relationship. You're talking now not about the Joint Chiefs, but talking about the Secretary of the Army, Secretary of the Navy, etc. I'm so far away from that area I haven't observed it. Even when I was Chairman, I was only in the JCS area, and not in the service channels, so I was not a direct observer of what went on.

Q: Your position now to President Johnson as his special consultant, was it primarily on the Far East? Could you tell me just a little bit—?

TAYLOR: I received a letter from him that made the world my oyster, but I necessarily decided to bite that oyster in digestible quantities. I spent most of my time on the Far Eastern questions, generally on Southeast Asia. Also, as soon as I got back in '65, I worked on the organization of the federal government for overseas operations. That work has resulted in the so-called NASM 341 organization that set up the Senior Interdepartmental Group and the regional interdepartmental groups, and made the Secretary of State the President's representative for overseas affairs. That was consummated in March 1966, and has been in effect until the present time. They're tinkering with that now to adjust it to the requirements of Mr. Nixon.

Q: And could you tell me what other activities highlight—?

TAYLOR: Oh, I think that's about all. After that reorganization was accomplished, I attended largely, as I say, to the Far Eastern affairs, making occasional trips out to the Far East; meanwhile trying to run a private business, which has made for a rather complicated life.

Q: About how many trips did you make to the Far East in this position?

TAYLOR: I'd have to get out my diaries. I would say four, perhaps five.

Q: Were these in terms of seeing the situation as it was; or was it communicating—?

Library of Congress

TAYLOR: Really keeping abreast. And on one occasion I went with Mr. Clifford. We went for the purpose of visiting the other countries who were contributing forces to South Vietnam to carry a Presidential message to them, and also to review the situation in Saigon.

Q: Could you offer me any sort of a comparison, having worked both with Mr. Johnson and Mr. Kennedy during their presidencies? What is your opinion of how these men compare, or do not compare?

TAYLOR: I wouldn't compare them in terms of—. It's impossible to compare them in terms of the effectiveness of the Administrations, and so on. We're all too close to these events. As individuals, of course, they were quite different in personality; different in age, background, and outlook on life. I wouldn't say one was better or worse than the other. They were just quite different.

President Kennedy had a great personal charm and, I would say, instilled a great loyalty and inspired team play on the part of his associates. President Johnson was more difficult to get to know, but once you got to know him, you could see what a strong character, what a determined man he was, and I acquired a great admiration for him in my association with him. He had the reputation, as you know, of cracking whips over his subordinates. I never saw that. My relations with him were extremely pleasant. And I valued my association with him. Of course, I had a particularly warm affection for John Kennedy and all his family.

Q: I'd like to just go to this last area of the Johnson Administration and your assessment of it. I think primarily because the Vietnam war has been such a large part of his Administration that it's almost attached to Mr. Johnson and his resultant unpopularity. I'd kind of like to get your ideas on that.

TAYLOR: I think we're going to find a great change, and a surprisingly quick change, in the public attitude toward President Johnson's Administration. I thought even in the last weeks

Library of Congress

of his Administration that the editorial comments and the attitude in many quarters which had been consistently hostile to him throughout his Administration were moderating. I think we all recognize that he carried a tremendous load, almost alone, in adhering to our policy in South Vietnam, which he was convinced was correct. I'm convinced he was right. I think ten years from now you'll find that the history books given him a very high rating, just as they have given a very high rating to President Truman for his great courage in the Korean War.

In his domestic accomplishments, the Vietnam war so over-shadowed the public attention that we've missed the fact that his domestic program was one of the most extensive, the most comprehensive, of any President in modern times.

Q: General Taylor, do you have any further comments?

TAYLOR: No. Just thank you for allowing me to contribute, and I hope this will be of some use to the record of the Johnson Administration.

End of interview